RESPONSES TO INFORMATION REQUESTS (RIRs)

3 February 2012

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Honduras: Areas of operation of Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18) (also known as the 18th Street gang) in Honduras; domestic and transnational networks; nature of any alliances and whether the maras dispute territory; violence perpetrated by gang members against other gang members (2009-December 2011)

Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, Ottawa

1. Areas of Operation

Sources indicate that both Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Mara 18 (M-18) [also known as the 18th Street gang] operate mostly in urban areas of Honduras (Gutiérrez Rivera 25 Jan. 2012; UN 15 June 2011). In correspondence with the Research Directorate, Lirio Gutiérrez Rivera, a post-doctoral researcher who specializes in gangs in Honduras at the Institute for Latin American Studies at Freie Universität in Berlin, indicated that *maras* are most active in the urban areas of Tegucigalpa, including the district of Comayaguela, and in the city and suburbs of San Pedro Sula, including the districts of Chamelecón, Choloma, El Roble, Villanueva and Cofradía (25 Jan. 2012). She explained that maras tend to take root in marginalized neighbourhoods or slums and industrial areas that host the "*maquilas*," (Gutiérrez Rivera 25 Jan. 2012), factories that manufacture and export products to other countries (Vargas-Hernández Jan. 2011; Brandt 2003).

In addition, Elyse Wilkinson, writing in the *Maine Law Review*, points out that the MS-13 and the M-18 are also present in rural areas and even "dominate in many neighbourhoods" where the government is weak (2010, 395). Thus, she says, the gang problem there is "worse" since the government is not able to provide "appropriate protection" from the gangs (Wilkinson 2010, 395). Gutiérrez Rivera says that the maras also operate in border areas, especially in the department of Ocotepeque, which borders Guatemala (25 Jan. 2012).

2. Territoriality

According to an article published by Agence France-Presse (AFP), the maras have divided Honduran cities into [translation] "zones or 'territories'" that are then disputed between M-18 and MS-13 (12 June 2011). Gutiérrez Rivera, writing in the *Bulletin of Latin American Research* in 2010, says that, in disputes over territory (also known as *rifa del barrio*), gangs "exercise and test territorial authority upon others," usually with violence, and retaliate to perceived challenges to their authority (2010, 499). She explained that these territorial disputes are largely associated with the collection of [translation] "resources," such as the "'war tax'" on public transportation providers, kidnappings, threats and theft (25 Jan. 2012) from individuals and businesses (Wilkinson 2010, 393). For example, Juan J. Fogelbach, a researcher at the US Office of Refugee, Asylum, and International Operations, indicates that, in recent years, there has been an increase in the burning of buses and the killing of bus drivers

(2011, 438). He notes that the violence has been reported to be the means by which gangs "compel bus owners to make extortion payments" (Fogelbach 2011, 438). Additionally, Gutiérrez Rivera points out that gangs use violence to "impose local order" or "'street level politics'" (2010, 495).

Gutiérrez Rivera also indicates that, with amendments in 2003 to the Penal Code, also known as the "Anti-gang Law," to penalize illicit associations and a national security policy to address gang violence, gang members have modified both their appearance and their "territorial strategies in order to reduce their visibility in the streets" (2010, 496-497). In spite of covering their tattoos, dressing casually and changing their movement, she explains that the gangs continue to exercise "strong influence" over neighbourhoods (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010, 497). She adds that the maras have also become more violent in response to the security policies (ibid. 25 Jan. 2012). *La Tribuna*, a Tegucigalpa-based newspaper, quotes the coordinator of the Crimes Against Property Unit (Unidad de los Delitos contra la Propiedad) as saying that maras used to be easily recognizable because of their tattoos and clothing, but that they have [translation] "evolved" to become more "subtle" in their activities, using cell phones to extort money from people instead of the streets (22 Feb. 2011).

3. Structure and Operation

According to Gutiérrez Rivera, who also spoke to the Research Directorate in a telephone interview, maras are divided into cliques or *clicas* of 15 to 20 members each (23 Jan. 2012). In some cases, bigger cliques may have close to 30 members (Gutiérrez Rivera 23 Jan. 2012.). Cliques can have up to 100 members in Honduran prisons (ibid.), and, according to AFP, there are respectively 136 and 150 members of MS-13 and M-18 imprisoned in the country's main penitentiary (5 June 2011). Gutiérrez Rivera also explained that cliques are [translation] "highly hierarchical," and that their leaders, who are called *primera palabra* (first word), make all the decisions with the advice of three or four other members of the clique (25 Jan. 2012). In an article published in *The Counter Terrorist* magazine, a Miami-based Security Solutions International publication on terrorism and counterterrorism-related issues (*The Counter Terrorist* n.d.), John P. Sullivan and Samuel Logan explain that the primera palabra functions like a commander and that he shares leadership responsibilities with a *segunda palabra* (second word) (Aug.-Sept. 2010). The authors — one of whom is a senior research fellow with the Center for the Advanced Studies of Terrorism (CAST) in Los Angeles, and the other a Latin American analyst and investigative journalist — add that the segunda palabra operates as an "executive officer" and, if from a "large, powerful" clique, extends his powers of influence over other smaller cliques (Sullivan and Logan Aug.-Sept. 2010).

Gutiérrez Rivera emphasizes, however, that the M-18 is more hierarchical and organized than its rival, the MS-13 (25 Jan. 2012). Several sources indicate that the maras do not have a central authority or leaders (Gutiérrez Rivera 23 Jan. 2012; Fogelbach 2011, 422; US Apr. 2010, 41) and that the cliques are autonomous (ibid.; Gutiérrez Rivera 25 Jan. 2012).

4. Domestic and Transnational Alliances

4.1 Domestic Alliances

According to Gutiérrez Rivera, the Anti-gang Law stimulated mobility and cooperation among the cliques within their respective maras (25 Jan. 2012.). Mobility to "other barrios, cities and, eventually, other countries" has strengthened the "sense of belonging to the gang" (Gutiérrez Rivera 2010, 498), which, in turn, has translated into a willingness to support other cliques in the same mara with manpower, weapons and resources (ibid. 25 Jan. 2012). She also added that, after the introduction of the anti-gang legislation, the maras became more cautious about allying themselves with

other gangs such as the Batos Locos, with which they had alliances in the past (ibid.). She noted that maras also became more "selective" in their recruitment efforts (ibid.).

4.2 Transnational Alliances

Sullivan and Logan write that the deportation of gang members from the United States to Central America has resulted in the creation of a "networked criminal diaspora" of transnational cliques (Sullivan and Logan Aug.-Sept. 2010). According to information provided by the US Department of Homeland Security, 25,635 persons were deported to Honduras in 2010; 41.5 percent of these deportations were based on criminal grounds (3 Jan. 2011, 9). Sullivan and foreign policy analyst Adam Elkus describe both MS-13 and M-18 as "third generation" gangs with "internationalized, networked, and complicated structures" in an article published on openDemocracy (Sullivan and Elkus 2 Dec. 2009), a non-profit, online publisher of news and opinion articles on world issues (openDemocracy n.d.).

A US Government Accountability Office report to Congress indicates that the maras have established transnational alliances with drug trafficking organizations in the US (Apr. 2010, 42). According to the US Congressional Research Service, "both gangs, but particularly the MS-13, have expanded geographically and become more organized and sophisticated" (3 Jan. 2011, 5). For example, *El Universal*, a Mexico City -based newspaper, quotes the Assistant Attorney General of Honduras as saying that Honduran maras are [translation] "seeking to negotiate directly with Mexican and Colombian drug cartels" (25 Nov. 2010). The Assistant Attorney General also indicated that the maras have "initiated a war to sieze control and operation of drug trafficking in Honduras" (*El Universal* 25 Nov. 2010.). Additionally, LatinNews reports that the Mexican gangs Los Zetas, the Sinaloa gang and La Familia Michoacana are operating in Honduras (16 Sept. 2010). According to the US Congressional Research Service, Mexican drug trafficking organizations are contracting members of MS-13 to carry out "revenge killings" (3 Jan. 2011, 6). Sources indicate that Honduras is used as a transit route for drugs heading to North America (AP 30 Oct. 2011; Reuters 22 Jan. 2010).

The online *Tucson Sentinel* reports that members of MS-13 from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, alongside the Zetas, have been working together to kidnap and intimidate Central American migrants in southern Mexico en route to the United States (11 Apr. 2011). According to a person who works at a shelter for migrants in Ixtepec, Mexico, maras work as spotters for kidnappers and as gunmen alongside Zetas commandos (*Tucson Sentinel* 11 Apr. 2011). Corroborating information on maras from Honduras operating along the southern Mexican border could not be obtained by the Research Directorate within the time constraints of this Response.

5. Violence Between Gangs

The media reports that Honduras is the most violent country in Central America (AFP 22 June 2011) and one of the most violent in the world (Reuters 14 Sept. 2011). Among the causes of the country's high homicide rate is conflicts between members of the maras, including the [translation] "settling of scores" (AFP 23 Mar. 2010). AFP quotes a specialist at the Central American Integration System (Sistema de Integración Centroamericana) as saying that maras are using women as an [translation] "'object of exchange'" in acts of vengeance (22 Apr. 2010). A member of a mara reportedly targets and kills women, such as wives or mothers, related to a gang member with whom he has a problem (AFP 22 Apr. 2010). In addition, the London-based *Observer* quotes a member of Oxfam Honduras as saying that women are victims of "'vengeance attacks'" by other gang members who want to "'send a message to male family members'" and by police officers retaliating for gang attacks on fellow officers (29 May 2011).

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

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